CICERO'S ESSAY *ON OLD AGE*

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THE recent proliferation of research on old age has already yielded a large crop of observations, hypotheses, opinions, and socio-political plans. It is to be expected that sound knowledge and improved social mechanisms will ultimately emerge. Until that happy time we may continue hoping to live long, although we know that longevity entails the statistical likelihood of penury, loneliness, and depression.

The plethora of new literature has produced nothing that even remotely threatens the fame of our greatest gerontological classic, Cicero's essay *On Old Age*. Even in the present age of sceptical analysis or systematic disparagement it is natural for an overwhelmed reader, whatever his age, to reread Cicero and to seek what enlightenment he can find. In a middle-aged physician who peers through trifocal lenses toward a future beclouded by committees and subcommittees, the temptation to reread the famous essay becomes irresistible.

In 44 B.C., at the age of 62, Cicero completed his dialogue *On Old Age*. His long career in rhetoric, poetry, oratory, and politics had come to a halt. He was burdened by debt and overloaded with domestic grief. For all these difficulties he sought solace in writing. In the space of about two years he wrote 11 works, most of which are still famous. Included among them is the treatise that forms the subject of the present discussion.

The essay on old age is cast in the form of an Aristotelian dialogue, in which two of the interlocutors, Publius Scipio Africanus Minor and Gaius Laelius, are limited to a few preliminary remarks, the main burden of the discussion being carried uninterruptedly by the third participant, Marcus Porcius Cato. The dialogue purports to have taken place in 150 B.C., when Cato was 84 years of age, about 50 years older than his two companions.

In a brief introduction Cicero, speaking in his own name, says—not quite credibly—that the composition of this book has been so delightful as to have erased the annoyances of old age, turning it into a happy time. The great discussion then begins.

At the outset Cato makes a series of memorable comments. He says that to those who lack the inner resources for happiness every age is burdensome. All men want to reach old age but reproach it when they reach it. The blame rests with character, not with age. In the presence of severe poverty old age cannot be taken lightly, even by a wise man; to a fool, even a rich one, it is necessarily burdensome. Unwise men attribute their own deficiencies and faults to old age.

There are four reasons, says Cato, why old age seems to be unhappy: it removes one from the active conduct of affairs; it weakens the body; it deprives one of nearly all physical pleasures; and it is not far from death. These four objections he considers in turn. Let the geriatric optimist take note that the treatment is wholly *defensive.*

The first objection, namely, that old age takes a man away from active pursuits, need not be regarded as very serious, according to Cato, since the most important deeds are done not by physical strength but by intellectual and moral qualities—precisely those qualities of character and judgment in which the old exceed the young.

This contention is both ingenious and specious. Old men, when they are removed from the active conduct of affairs, are usually extruded *both* from physical and intellectual participation. The young profess to admire the aged but their admiration is exceeded by their yearning for the status that age may bring. This must have been as true among ambitious young Romans as it is among ambitious young Americans.

Cato remarks that the greatest nations have been overthrown by the young and defended and restored by the aged. Youthful rashness stands in contrast with the prudence of age.

The second charge, that old age weakens the body, is rejected on several grounds. Cato does not need the strength he had during youth; those who are too weak to act can at least teach; and the old may take pleasure in the company of youths whom they have instructed.

At this point Cato offers noteworthy advice: we should resist old age; we should vigilantly compensate for its deficiencies; we should combat it as if we were fighting against a disease; and we should adopt a moderate regimen of life. Old age is honored only if it defends itself, preserves its rights, maintains its independence, and rules its own realm.

In refuting the third charge against old age: namely, that it deprives one of almost all physical pleasures—*quod privet omnibus fere voluptatibus*—Cato asserts that the deprivation is a boon if it takes away the

most vicious defect of youth. He now quotes a remarkable speech made by one Archytas of Tarentum. This obscure guru allegedly said:

> No more deadly curse has been given by nature to man than carnal pleasure, through eagerness for which the passions are driven recklessly and uncontrollably to its gratification. From it come treason and the overthrow of states; and from it spring secret and corrupt conferences with public foes. In short, there is no criminal purpose and no evil deed which the lust for pleasure will not drive men to undertake. Indeed, rape, adultery, and every like offence are set in motion by the enticements of pleasure and by nothing else. . . .*

The suggestion that sexual impulses cause treason, sedition, and revolution, as well as ordinary coital misdemeanor, is probably uncommon in ancient literature, and impresses one as both medieval and proto-Freudian.

Cato adds that carnality impedes deliberation, that old age delights in mild pleasures, including those of conversation, and that the zeal for learning may increase late in life. The overarching benefit of old age is influence *(auctoritas)*.

Critics complain that the aged are moody, troubled, irascible, and difficult. Some old men are misers. These, Cato says—not quite accurately—are defects of character and are not attributable to age. Cato has conveniently overlooked the fact that the irascible old man *(senex iratus)* was so common as to have been a stock figure in Greek and Roman comedy; surely this is significant.

As to senile avarice, Cato sinks to an even lower level of incomprehension when he says: "As for avariciousness in the old, what purpose it can serve I do not understand, for can anything be more absurd in the traveller than to increase his luggage as he nears his journey's end." As if senile avarice were based on reason!

The final argument attacks the objection that old age is the close precursor of death. Death, says Cato, should be held of no account. Further, death occurs at every age, hence it should not be regarded as characteristic of old age. This fantastically specious example of lawyer's reasoning is not quite the nadir. The old man, Cato dares to assert, is

*Cicero: *De Senectute*. Falconer, W. A., translator. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1923, reprinted 1946, page 49. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

better off than the youth, since the old man has already reached what the young man desires; one wants to live long, the other has lived long. Ingenious.

But the same part of the essay that contains these pyrites also contains some valuable advice. Cato urges that whatever the amount of time that is given us, we should be content with it. Old men should not cling greedily to the little that remains but they should not give it up without a reason. Indifference to death, if taught in youth, will produce tranquillity in later life. And finally, Cato says, consolation is derivable from a belief in the immortality of the soul.

Such being the course of Cicero's defense, placed in the mouth of Cato, what is the reaction of a 20th century reader?

The essay contains many wise observations and several stirring thoughts. In the first place, Cicero points out that in the presence of poverty old age cannot be taken lightly; no amount of philosophy can overcome want. A second requisite is wisdom, or at least ordinary common sense; in the absence of this element not even wealth can make old age happy.

Throughout the dialogue Cicero insists that the blame rests with *character*, rather than with old age. To those who lack the internal resources for happiness, every period of life is burdensome. It is their own vices and their own faults that fools charge to old age. This is consistent with contemporary clinical experience. Further, one should take a positive attitude and resist senility by instituting a good daily regimen and by attempting continued mild activity.

Along with these admonitions, formulated clearly and expressed grandly, there are occasional failures and also several bits of sophistry, which I have pointed out in previous paragraphs. It is not astonishing that Cicero remained a lawyer to the end of his life.

The tone of the essay is one of seriousness, dignity, and nobility. The magnificent prose style, simpler than that of the perfervid orations, is well adapted to reinforce the impression of courage and gravity.

Perhaps, instead of picayune attempts to analyze each of Cicero's contentions, we should view the essay *On Old Age* as the attempt of a capable and noble man to cope with one of life's greatest problems and to provide solace for himself and others. Viewed in this way, the dialogue seems more than likely to retain its position as a beloved and admired treasure of the human race.

Fig. 1. Attic sepulchral vase, second half of VIII century B.C. In a panel at the center the deceased is depicted lying on a bier and surrounded by gesturing mourners. The lower panel shows a funerary procession of chariots and armed men. The vase is 72.3 cm. tall. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914.

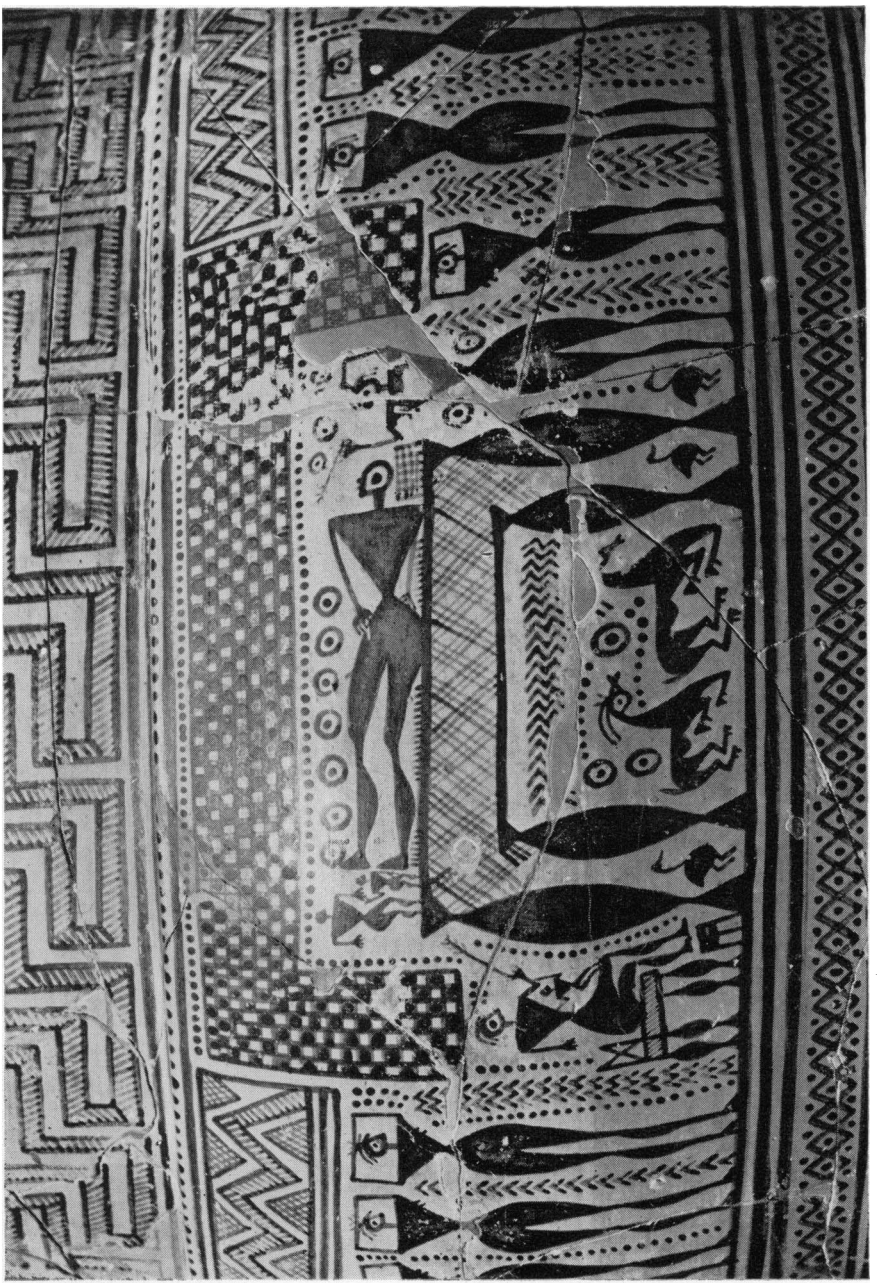

Fig. 2. Detail of Attic sepulchral vase, showing the deceased on his bier, surrounded by mourners. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914.